

Holy Places, Holy God, Holy Lives

Exodus 3:1-15

Crossroads Christian Church

Matthew 16:21-28

August 31, 2014 Pentecost 12A

As a boy in Iowa, I dreamed of doing many things. One of them was walking the Appalachian Trail. I'm not now nor have ever been a great hiker or a backpacker, but I could dream, couldn't I? I recall poring over the old battered road atlas, tracing the route with my finger, and dreaming—if not the whole 2158 miles, maybe someday I could at least see part of it, and view those beautiful mountains and valleys spreading out below me.

Then, around twenty years ago, I got a chance at least to set foot on a portion of the trail. My wife asked me if I would be willing to take some vacation time and help her sell books at a church assembly in Knoxville, TN. Our expenses would be paid. I would do the grunt work in helping her set up and take down, and while she was selling books I could spend two days in Great Smoky Mountain National Park! Quickly, I said yes. I only had one day for the trail, because there were other areas I wanted to visit, but I figured that I could walk for a couple of hours, maybe cover five miles. This would be the day that I would see those long, beautiful vistas. But as I drove, I drove upward into a cloud. Time to worry. Would I see any of those beautiful long vistas? As I pulled into the trailhead, got out and began to walk, something strange and wondrous happened. The cloud layer was thin above me, so I was walking in the clouds, yet still walking in light. I couldn't see more than a few yards, but it was still beautiful. Everything glowed and shimmered. My eyes were drawn to the tiny things—the droplets of water hanging onto the fuzzy tips of the moss

on tree trunks—the glint of mica in the boulders—the way that the trees leaned permanently away from the prevailing winds there on the mountaintop—the tender green curls of young ferns. I didn't hear any voices from heaven, I had no visitation from Moses or Elijah, but I was still in a place filled with awe and wonder. God was there. The place seemed filled with God's glory. I remembered how the glory of God was hidden in clouds in Old Testament stories. It was a holy place for me, and it remains holy in my memory. My heart was filled with joy because I had been able to witness something so beautiful, so lustrous, so numinous.

Gaelic culture has a tradition about thin places. Thin places are places where the boundary between heaven and earth seems thin, so that one almost touches the other. It's as if there was a membrane between earth and heaven, ordinary daily life and God, and in some places that membrane is stretched thinner than in others. Intuitive and aware people may feel a shiver up their spine, or goose bumps on their arm, for no apparent reason, except for a sense of presence. Thin places may not necessarily be places with beautiful, breathtaking scenery. They may be wild and lonely islands or deserts.

Where do you get a feeling of being in a holy place, of being on holy ground? At an old family cemetery, perhaps, consecrated by the memories of people you loved, or of ancestors you heard stories about? In the quiet of a sanctuary such as this? At a church camp, around the campfire? At a historic site? At the delivery room of a hospital when new life came into the world and into your family? On a campout when you looked up at a starry sky and wondered with the psalmist, "When I look at your heavens, the work of your fingers, the moon and

the stars that you have established, who are we that you are mindful of us?" Such holy moments in such places become handles to hold onto, to help remind us of our faith, to help remind us of God. They give us perspective. I invite you, later on today, either by yourself or around a table with family and friends, to share some of the places that have been holy places for you.

Moses wasn't expecting an experience of God's presence when his attention was caught by the burning bush. He was just tending sheep, the same boring job that he had done for many years. Dr. John Fairless puts it this way. "Not a particularly glorious or stimulating job. Sheep go out, sheep eat, sheep drink, sheep do whatever sheep do. Shepherd watches out for danger, keeps sheep from doing anything stupid. Sheep lay down for the night, next day start all over again. Humdrum, by definition. Even the inflammatory shrub itself is not that particularly awesome at first glance. More of a curiosity, really. But, then -- in the midst of the humdrum routine and through a curious happenstance -- GOD SPEAKS. And Moses' life is certainly never going to be the same!"ⁱ Those words show us how in the midst of the ordinary, God can break in. As he got near the bush, he heard a voice. "Moses, Moses, take off our shoes, for you are standing on holy ground." Years later, when he was worrying about the logistics of how to keep thousands of former slaves alive while traveling through the wilderness that separated Egypt from the Holy Land, Moses may have had times when he wondered, "Why am I doing this?" And then he'd remember the burning bush, and the voice of God, and say, "Oh, yes. That's why."

Likewise, when we get bogged down in daily work, and we're not sure whether running this report or

balancing that column of figures or fixing that section of fence is even worth doing or not, maybe we can remember back to some of our own experiences of God's presence, and say, "Oh, yes. That's why."

Some of us are blessed with a vocation that is meaningful and fulfilling, that makes a positive difference in people's lives, and that we truly enjoy. Yet there still come times when we feel burned out, when we're tired or wonder if we're up to the task, when the old joy we once knew just isn't there. Others of us have jobs that are just routine, when our work is something we do just to bring home a paycheck. We just endure it the best we can. We don't expect any great revelations of God to appear on our computer monitors, in the grease pit, in the classroom, or on the North 40.

But do you know what? That doesn't mean that God isn't there. That doesn't mean our work is really meaningless or empty. If we work to keep aware of God's presence in our lives, if we pray and listen for God in those times when quiet moments come, God will bless us in our task. What we do will be done to the glory of God. We will offer it up to God, and God will accept and bless it.

Even if we don't have paid employment, we still work and we still need God's presence in our daily lives. If we're students, going to school is our work. If we're homemakers, we're entrusted with the lives and well-being of our families. If we're retired and living on pension, we still have our daily tasks, and we still have ways to serve God and love others. Serving God and loving others is the ultimate vocation for each Christian.

In our Gospel lesson, a continuation of last week's about Peter's Great Confession, Jesus and the disciples

are on retreat, taking time by themselves to gather their forces. Jesus uses this time to tell his closest friends that the day must come when he would undergo suffering and death at the hands of the religious leaders, but on the third day he would rise from the dead. That was too much for Peter. "God forbid it, Lord. This must never happen to you!" When Jesus heard these words, he might have remembered the days after his own baptism when the tempter would encourage him to take the easy way to fame, power, and success, and now he was hearing the same thing in the voice of one of his closest friends. "Get behind me, Satan! You are a stumbling block to me, for you are setting your mind not on divine things, but human things. Then he told his disciples that if they were to be his followers, they would have to learn to deny themselves, take up their crosses, and follow him. For those who tried to save their lives would lose them; and those who lost their lives for Christ's sake would find eternal life. In their friend Jesus, the disciples were hearing the message of the Holy God. God was challenging them. Do they live for themselves, which would lead to death, or do they live for Christ and find a life that conquers death? We have the same choice today. Live for ourselves? Or live for Christ, live holy lives, were any place can become a holy place? The choice is still ours. Amen.

ⁱ John Fairless, Lectionarylab.com, Pentecost 11.